



## Don't cut the countryside

### Charities' message to Government

The Hawk and Owl Trust joined fellow members of umbrella group Wildlife and Countryside link to warn the government against cuts to conservation budgets.

Their message was: "England's conservation organisations have joined forces to paint a grim picture of a countryside starved of money by budget cuts.

On the 30th anniversary of the Wildlife and Countryside Link, its members have issued an unprecedented warning about what the future would hold should the Government slash spending on conservation, wildlife-friendly farming and public recreation.

The organisation shared its concerns with MPs at a parliamentary reception, held to mark 30 years of working together for the natural environment.

Paul de Zylva, Chair of Wildlife and Countryside Link, said: "We all know the new Government will have a hard job making difficult and far-reaching decisions about where the axe should fall on public spending.

"There may be a temptation to see cuts in conservation and recreation as an easy win, but in reality ministers need to think very hard before making cuts that could have profound and perhaps irreversible consequences for England's wildlife, landscapes and people.

"We want to make clear that in the case of conservation, slashing budgets would be a false economy – short term savings would translate into huge long term costs for our economy and our national well-being."

Link fears an austerity countryside, where the loss of public money for protected sites such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) has left the country's best wildlife sites sadly degraded.

Reedbeds are dry and clogged with brambles; heathlands have vanished as scrub begins to take over. Wetlands have dwindled and rivers and canals have become clogged by invasive plants which threaten native species.

The loss of money for wildlife-friendly farming has seen farmland birds resume their slide into extinction. Bat populations are clinging onto survival in isolated pockets, facing starvation due to the dwindling insect populations, while the country's flower meadows have all but vanished.

England's uplands have become degraded; their wildlife is in decline, and their ability to lock away carbon and provide clean drinking water for millions sadly reduced.

On the coasts, cuts have undone years of work to manage remaining and newly created coastal habitats such as saltmarsh and saline lagoons, impacting wildlife and flood protection.

At sea, less management and enforcement has seen a further decline in wildlife-rich reefs and seagrass beds that shelter species like seahorses and pipefish. Illegal fishing has increased, putting even more pressure on fish numbers.

There are fewer people too. Without cash to keep paths and bridleways open, huge swathes of the English countryside and coast are effectively closed to millions.

Locked up in towns and cities, unable to enjoy the country's breathing spaces, people are less healthy, costing the National Health Service millions of extra pounds each year.

In turn, the rural economy is denied the large sums of money visitors to the countryside spend each year.

Paul de Zylva said: "Such a picture is not an exaggeration, but nor is it an inevitability. Ministers will need to make difficult choices about which areas of public spending offer the best value for money.

"Defra and its agencies like Natural England spend just 0.5 per cent of the Government's budget, yet their investment in the countryside brings huge benefits in wildlife, clean air and water, flood alleviation, carbon sequestration and pollination. A healthy natural environment is not a luxury but fundamental to our existence."

He added: "The Deputy Prime Minister has said it would be morally wrong to leave our children and grandchildren with huge debts. It would be just as immoral to bequeath them an impoverished environment and an England that is in many ways diminished."